PARTICLES CHEATSHEET

CANTOLOUNGE

Getting started

Particles, particles, particles

I always like to adopt the attitude that learning Cantonese is not a very difficult thing. Some people say that I'm biased because I'm a native speaker, but that's not true. I think language learning in general, while I can't say it's easy, it's most certainly doable. I think many people confuse "time consuming" with "difficult", and while one can imply the other, this isn't the case with language learning.

However, every language comes particular challenges that increase the "barrier to entry" per se. With Romance languages, it's usually the complex conjugations and exceptions people have to learn, as well as using pronominal verbs flexibly; with Slavic languages, declensions can be challenging; and with Japanese and Korean, learning honorific language is like learning a different language altogether.

With Cantonese, however, there are two main difficulties difficult to learn for foreigners, but equally difficult to teach from a teacher's standpoint: (1) understanding the "mistake prone" speech patterns Hong Kong people adopt; (2) particles.

This cheatsheet will address the second challenge, because the first challenge is even more difficult to break down for foreigners - you need to have a lot of time, and a very, very patient person to help you wade through the particularities of Cantonese diction.

What are particles?

For those of you who're just getting started with Cantonese, the notion of particles might seem like a strange one. So what are they and how do they work?

Particles are things that you add on to the end of a sentence (it can be a clause, not a full sentence) to express a certain mood or sentiment, like derision, irritation, sarcasm, or with a particular objective in mind, clarification, repetition, etc.

In English, people achieve the same effect though their voices - anger, a rebuke, correction, these are things you do by changing the pitch of your voice, in conjunction with certain fixed expressions. Well, in Cantonese, you'll be pleasantly surprised to know that instead of changing your pitch only, there are certain words to indicate these things - particles.

Let's take a look at an example to see particles at work.

Didn't you say that it's $2000 last time?
你上次**唔係話**係二千蚊**嘅咩**？
nei5 soeng6 ci3 **m4 hai6 waa6** hai6 ji6 cin1 man1 **ge3 me1**?

Literally, **唔係話** translates to "not say", but it's through the **嘅咩** that you can really hear the tone.

In this cheatsheet, you'll see examples of each particle we have in this list, so you can see typical use cases for them.

Note that sometimes, there is no English equivalent, or it's very difficult to translate a particular mood. In these cases, I'll supplement them with explanations.

An important note

Please note that this is meant to be a cliff's note of particles. Some particles are easier to understand than others, but some can be very context-specific, while others can span multiple uses.

Because of space limitations, it's only possible to pick the most typical usage for each particle and show you how they're used in this cheatsheet. But please keep in mind that there can be other uses of particles that I simply couldn't fit on this cheatsheet.

How to use this cheatsheet

My suggestion is to print this cheatsheet out, I strongly advise against learning languages only with an electronic version, printing something on paper sounds trivial, but in my experiences, it's really made a difference.

I also recommend storing it somewhere easily accessible - maybe you might decide to blu-tack it onto the wall, or put it inside a clear folder.

Whenever you have time, go over the sample sentences, and then reflect upon the English explanations I've given for each particle. If you can do that, your understanding of particles will grow stronger over time (like how wine tastes better with time), you'll pick up more emotive information when listening to Cantonese, until one day you'll be confident enough to try them out.

In a nutshell: refer back to this sheet very often to develop a strong intuition for each particle.

Questions

As usual, if you have any questions, you're very welcome to ask them here:

https://cantolounge.com/cantonese-questions/

Or if you prefer to get in touch directly, you can do so through the contact form here:

https://cantolounge.com/contact/

Alright, with that in mind, let's dive straight into those examples, summarized into this cheatsheet for your convenience!

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Cantonese Particles Cheatsheet

Particle	Sample sentence
吖 aa1 questioning; suggestive	你想唔想食飯先吖？ nei5 soeng2 m4 soeng2 sik6 faan6 sin1 aa1? Do you want to have dinner first? (suggestive)
吖嗱 aa1 laa4 suggestion; warning	你試下點我吖嗱。 nei5 si3 haa5 dim3 ngo5 aa1 laa4. Just you try touching me. (warning)
吖嗎 aa1 maa3 rhetorical; ask knowingly	今日落豪雨所以學校冇開吖嗎！(var. 吖嘛 aa1 maa5) gam1 jat6 lok6 hou4 jyu5 so2 ji5 hok6 haau6 mou5 hoi1 aa1 maa3! Today's raining really heavily, so the school's closed! (Didn't you know?)
呀 aa3 questioning; cautioning; order	佢咁多年到底幾咁努力先至行到今時今日哩度，你又知唔知吖？ keoi5 gam3 do1 nin4 dou3 dai2 gei3 gam3 nou5 lik6 sin1 zi3 haang4 dou3 gam1 si4 gam1 jat6 li1 dou6, nei5 jau6 zi1 m4 zi1 aa1? (Exactly) How much effort he's invested all these years to get to where he is now, do you know? Well? (slightly stern)
呀嗱 aa1 laa4 imperative; warning	你再放肆呀嗱，睇下會有咩後果。 nei5 zoi3 fong3 si3 aa1 laa4, tai2 haa5 wui5 jau5 me1 hau6 gwo3. Try, just try to behave so impudently, see what happens. (slightly threatening)
呃 aak3 agreement	- 陣間食唔食拉麵？- 好呃！ zan6 gaan1 sik6 m4 sik6 laai1 min6? hou2 aak3! - Do you want to eat ramen later? - Yeah, sure! (agreement)
啊 aa4 ascertaining	啊Ben走咗啊？ aa3 Ben zau2 zo2 aa4? Did Ben already leave? (ascertaining, slight surprise)
罷啦 baa2 laa1 helpless	今日突然間病咗，唯有喺屋企休息罷啦。(var. 喺啦 hai2 laa1) gam1 jat6 dak6 jin4 gaan1 beng6 zo2, wai4 jau5 hai2 uk1 kei2 jau1 sik1 baa2 laa1. I suddenly fell sick today, so I can only stay at home and rest. (instead of going somewhere more exciting)
嘬 bo3 caution; praise	你個小朋友真係好乖嘬。 nei5 go3 siu2 pang4 jau5 zan1 hai6 hou2 gwai1 bo3. Your child is really well-behaved. (praise)
□(1)嗎 gaa1 maa3 light warning	你點可以對佢動手□？佢係女仔嚟□嗎！ nei5 dim2 ho2 ji5 deoi3 keoi5 dung6 sau3 gaa3? keoi5 hai6 neoi5 zai2 lei4 gaa1 maa3! How could you hit her? She's a girl! (warning, condemnation, alarmed)
□ gaa3 affirm oneself	哩隻綠茶飲咗對身體好好□。 li1 zek3 luk6 caa4 jam2 zo2 deoi3 san1 tai2 hou2 hou2 gaa3.

	This type of green tea is really good for the body. (makes you sound more certain)
□咋 gaa3 zaa3 "only"	我淨係識講小小□咋。(var. 嘅咋 ge3 zaa3) ngo5 zing6 hai6 sik1 gong2 siu2 siu2 gaa3 zaa3. I only know how to speak (this language) a little. (emphasis on only)
□嗱 gaa3 laa3 emphasis	我勸咗佢□嗱，佢聽唔聽睇佢自己啦。(var. 嘅嗱 ge3 laa3) ngo5 hyun3 zo2 keoi5 gaa3 laa3, keoi5 teng1 m4 teng1 tai2 keoi5 zi6 gei2 laa1. I already warned him, whether he listens or not is up to him. (reaffirm)
□咩 gaa3 me1 questioning	哩個字咁讀□咩？(var. 嘅咩 ge3 me1) li1 go3 zi6 gam2 duk6 gaa3 me1? This word is pronounced like this? (questioning, you didn't know before)
□ gaa4 surprise; realization	原來貓有成二十年壽命□？ jyun4 loi4 maau1 jau5 seng4 ji6 sap6 nin4 sau6 meng6 gaa4? So cats have a longevity of nearly 20 years? (surprise, didn't know this before)
嘅 ge3 affirmation; agreement	係嘅，哩個plan包埋無限流量嘅。 hai6 ge3, li1 go3 plan baau1 maai4 mou4 haan6 lau4 loeng6 ge3. That's right, this carrier plan comes with unlimited data. (sound more certain)
嘅 ge2 affirmation; comprehension; disbelief	咁簡單嘅case點解會搞成咁嘅？ gam3 gaan2 daan1 ge3 case dim2 gaai2 wui5 gaau2 sing4 gam2 ge2? How could (you) mess up such a simple case? (in disbelief)
啩 gwaa3 doubt; conjecture	- 佢陣間幾時會嚟嘅？- 唔知喎，十點半啩。 keoi5 zan6 gaan1 gei2 si4 wui5 lei4 ge2? m4 zi1 wo3, sap6 dim2 bun3 gwaa3. - When is he going to arrive? - I don't know, around 10:30, I guess? (uncertain)
咋 zaa3 dissatisfaction + only	我啱啱先開始學咋，唔好咁衰啦！ ngo5 aam1 aam1 sin1 hoi1 ci2 hok6 zaa3, m4 hou2 gam3 seoi1 laa1! I only just started learning, don't be so hard on me! (~get off me!)
咋 zaa4 questioning; dissatisfaction	三粒鐘你淨係寫咗一百個字咋，你喺度搞乜鬼啊？ saam1 lap1 zung1 nei5 zing6 hai6 se2 zo2 jat1 baak3 go3 zi6 zaa4, nei5 hai2 dou6 gaau2 mat1 gwai3 aa3? (dissatisfaction) You only wrote 100 words in three hours? What the hell have you been doing?
啫 ze1 only; response during pleasantries	我只係勸下你啫，唔使咁大反應啩。 ngo5 zi2 hai6 hyun3 haa5 nei5 ze1, m4 sai2 gam3 daai6 faan2 jing3 gwaa3. I was only warning you, there's no need to be so angry. (only)
啫嘛 ze1 maa3 correct quantity of + emphasis	你跑咗一個圈啫嘛，點會已經氣喘□？(var. 之嘛 zi1 maa3) nei5 paau2 zo2 jat1 go3 hyun1 ze1 maa3, dim2 wui5 ji5 ging1 hei3 cyun2 gaa3? You only ran one lap, how could you already be out of breath? (emphasis on only)
啫囉 ze3 bo3 only + slight emphasis	啲蘋果十蚊啫囉，咁抵都唔買？ di1 ping4 gwo2 sap6 man1 ze3 bo3, gam3 dai2 dou1 m4 mai5? (only + advisory) The apples are only ten bucks, you're not going to buy even when they're so cheap?

啦 laa1 request; command	喂，快啲行啦，其他人係度等緊呀。 wei3, faai3 di1 haang4 laa1, kei4 taa1 jan4 hai2 dou6 dang2 gan2 aa3. Hey, move it, the others are waiting. (strongly urge / command)
啦嗎 laa1 maa3 reaffirmation + emphasis	你執好嘢啦嗎，我哋行□嘩。 nei5 zap1 hou2 je5 laa1 maa3, ngo5 dei6 haang4 gaa3 laa3. You're done packing right? We're leaving. (reaffirm)
嘩 laa3 affirmation; inquire about status	醫生準備好嘩，你而家可以入去。 ji1 sang1 zeon2 bei6 hou2 laa3, nei5 ji4 gaa1 ho2 ji5 jap6 heoi3. The doctor's ready, you can go inside now. (affirm, yes the doctor *is* ready now)
嘩囉 laa3 bo3 warning; hurry someone	喂，你好夠嘩囉! wei3, nei5 hou2 gau3 laa3 bo3! Hey, that's enough of you! (strong warning)
嘩啩 laa3 gwaa3 conjecture to something's change	宜家乜都搞掂嘩啩！ ji4 gaa1 mat1 dou1 gaau2 dim6 laa3 gwaa3! I'm guessing everything's done by now, right? (doubting this thing that's in a different state than before, maybe it's more finished)
嘩可 laa3 ho2 confirmation	你填好曬張form嘩可？ nei5 tin4 hou2 saai3 zoeng1 form laa3 ho2? You're done filling in the form, right? (confirm that the form is complete)
嘩咩 laa3 me1 inquire about something's status	你已經跑完步嘩咩？ nei5 ji5 ging1 paau2 jyun4 bou6 laa3 me1? Have you already finished jogging? (slight disbelief)
嘞 laak3 certainty; inquire about something's status	呢度搞掂曬嘞，剩番落嚟的嘢就交返俾你。 li1 dou6 gaau2 dim6 saai3 laak3, zing6 faan1 lok6 lei4 di1 je5 zau6 gaau1 faan1 bei2 nei5. We're done here, I'll hand the rest of this back to you. (certainly done)
嚟□ lei4 gaa3 declarative; emphasis; confirming	佢係加拿大人嚟□，唔係美國人囉！ keoi5 hai6 gaa1 naa4 daai6 jan4 lei4 gaa3, m4 hai6 mei5 gwok3 jan4 lo1! Look, he's Canadian, NOT American! (strong declaration)
嚟嘅 lei4 ge3 emphasis	呢個形狀係三角形嚟嘅，嗰個先至係圓形。 li1 go3 jing4 zong6 hai6 saam1 gok3 jing4 lei4 ge3, go2 go3 sin1 zi3 hai6 jyun4 jing4. This is a triangle, *that's* a circle. (slightly weaker declaration)
囉 lo1 certainty; irritation; clarification	我唔係聾嘅囉，你頭先講嘅嘢我乜都聽到曬囉！ ngo5 m4 hai6 long4 ge3 lo1, nei5 tau4 sin1 gong2 ge3 je5 ngo5 mat1 dou1 teng1 dou2 saai3 lo1! I'm not deaf, you know, I heard *every single thing* you just said! (irritation; disbelief)
囉 lo3 something new happens	- 之前食嗰個缽仔糕呢？- 好似冇曬囉。(between nonchalance and disappointment) zi1 cin4 sik6 go2 go3 but6 zai2 gou1 ne1? hou2 ci5 mou5 saai3 lo3.

	- Where's that pudding cake we had before? - It seems like there's no more (of it).
囉嗦 lo3 bo3 reminder; to hurry	喂，好行囉嗦，唔係陣間遲到呀！ wei3, hou2 haang4 lo3 no3, m4 hai6 zan6 gaan1 ci4 dou3 aa3! Hey, you better hurry, or we might be late later! (strongly urges)
咯 lok3 certainty; status change; inquire about something's status	都話唔使你幫咯！ dou1 waa6 m4 sai2 nei5 bong1 lok3! I said *I don't...need....your...help*! (strong rejection)
咩 me1 surprise; questioning	咦，你星期六唔得閒咩？ ji2, nei5 sing1 kei4 luk6 m4 dak1 haan4 me1? Oh, you're not free on Saturday? (surprise)
咩 me1*4 disagreement; rebuke; reprimanding	你short咗咩，十萬睇成一百萬！ nei5 short zo2 me1*4, sap6 maan6 tai2 sing4 jat1 baak3 maan6! Have you lost it!? Reading 100,000 as 1,000,000! (reprimanding tone)
□(2) tim1 emphasis; troubled due to prior error in judgment	喂，sorry呀，我唔知你識講廣東話□！ wei3, sorry aa3, ngo5 m4 zi1 nei5 sik1 gong2 gwong2 dung1 waa2 tim1! I'm so sorry, I didn't know you can speak Cantonese! (implying I thought you didn't speak it before)
喎 wo3 reminder; discussions; realization	你陣間唔好唔記得俾啲貓糧啲貓食喎！ nei5 zan6 gaan1 m4 hou2 m4 gei3 dak1 bei2 di1 maau1 loeng4 di1 maau1 sik6 wo3! Don't forget to give the cats cat food! (moderate reminder)

Notes

Unfortunately, due to a technical problem, two particle characters display as a box in the pdf. I've included the two of them as photos below for your reference.

(1) gaa1, gaa3, gaa4

(2) tim1